As I watched Coronavirus Taskforce Member Dr. Anthony Fauci behind the podium at the White House press room last week, he delivered words that cut through the Black Community like a knife. He said bluntly that: “Health disparities have always existed for the African-American Community, but here again with a crisis, it’s shining a bright light on how unacceptable that is because—yet again— when you have a situation like the coronavirus, they are suffering disproportionately”.

Locally, blacks make up nine percent of Los Angeles County’s population. Although information is changing daily, initial COVID-19 data shows that of all the COVID-19 deaths where race was reported, 14% were African American.

Future research will, hopefully, put to rest all the myths and social media theories during the early stages of the outbreak, suggesting that darker skin color could be a safeguard against the virus.

Dr. Fauci went on to say that the data haven’t shown that blacks are getting infected more than anyone else. Instead, it’s their all-too-common underlying medical conditions, like asthma and other respiratory diseases, heart disease and diabetes that have led our community to be more likely to be hospitalized or die from the COVID-19.

Those same underlying medical conditions are affected by the air we breathe. As Chairman of the South Coast Air Quality Management District Governing Board, we have been at the forefront of taking action to improve air quality in disadvantaged communities across Southern California.

Through Assembly Bill 617 (AB 617), we have been working tirelessly with disadvantaged communities to find solutions to bring real change and improvement in our air quality. Unfortunately, Governor Newsom’s January budget proposal called for significant funding cuts for AB 617 that would have helped our disadvantaged communities reduce air pollution and thereby improve public health. In addition, the Governor’s budget made a $135 million cut to clean transportation funding; from $485 million last year to $350 million for 2020, thus making it more difficult to carry out these important programs.

Despite the air being cleaner because of recent rainy days, along with less traffic caused by stay at home orders, this is not the time to declare victory. We know that as we approach our smog season, we will continue to face poor air quality and our most disadvantaged communities will continue to suffer more of the adverse health effects. Indeed, a study by the World Health Organization states that air pollution is a global health crisis that kills an estimated seven million people worldwide each year. The days of taking air pollution lightly are over.

Sincerely,

William A. Burke, Ed.D.
Chairman of the Governing Board
South Coast Air Quality Management District